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The Navy in the War of the American Revolution

BY REAR ADMIRAL
JAMES A. GREER, U. S. N.

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THE NAVY IN THE WAR OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.[1]

BY REAR ADMIRAL JAMES A. GREER, U. S. N.

GATHERED as we are here this evening to do honor to our ancestors of the War of the American Revolution, I will confine myself to calling attention briefly to a few facts bearing upon the naval history of that struggle, which I have compiled from various sources. These facts, with one or two exceptions, are given to a great extent from a dry statistical rather than a narrative standpoint, and will be, probably, of more interest to the student than to the general reader.

As soon as the War of the Revolution was fairly entered upon, the subject of a navy engaged the attention of public men, and this was very natural, as the majority of the colonists were descendants of those who owed allegiance to the "Mistress of the Seas."

In October, 1776, the Americans (I here use for the first time this distinctive title), had thirteen vessels in course of construction, and ten comparatively large, with several smaller ones in actual service. Early in 1781 all of these, having done more or less good service, had been removed from the list by various causes, mostly disasters.

About this time Congress ordered to be built three 74's, five frigates and two smaller vessels. I can find no record of the larger vessels referred to, excepting the *America*, seventy-four guns, a new ship, which was presented to Louis XVI of France in 1782.

Private armed vessels, mostly small ones, were fitted out by the Colonies and accomplished, for the opportunities afforded, effective service.

The vessels of all classes numbered about sixteen hundred; of these there were many of the same name. To show the style of nomenclature popular in those days it is interesting

[1] A paper read before the District of Columbia Society of the Sons of the American Revolution.

to note that there were eleven *Active's*, eleven *Adventurer's*, seventeen *Hope's*, fifteen *Revenge's*, twenty-one *Ranger's* and seventeen *Fox's*. The women were not forgotten, as there were seventeen *Betsey's*, twelve *Mary's*, ten *Polly's*, twelve *Patty's* and twelve *Sally's;* and, by the way, it occurs to me as somewhat strange that not one of our large modern vessels has been called *America*. I can find no record of one of that name save the "74," presented to France in 1782.

For a largely improvised sea force under adverse surroundings, it is surprising to note the ground covered. It operated offensively and made captures on our coast, principally from Cape Hatteras, northerly, in the West Indies, the Atlantic Ocean, Bay of Biscay, English Channel, and coasts of Scotland, Holland, France, and Spain.

I will now call attention to the man, John Paul Jones, who of all the naval commanders in the War of the Revolution stands preëminent, and in whose memory initiatory steps have been taken for a monument, to be erected in Washington at a point to be determined later. It has been suggested that the southwest corner of Lafayette Square would be appropriate, as it would then be complement to the Lafayette group on the southeast corner.

It is claimed that the first ensign shown by a regular American man-of-war was displayed on board the *Alfred*, Commodore Hopkins, it being hoisted by Lieutenant Jones, off Philadelphia, in December, 1775. It was a device representing a pine tree with a rattlesnake coiled at its base and about to strike, with the motto, "Don't tread on me."

It may be of some interest to recall that on January 2, 1776, Washington raised at Cambridge the "great Union flag," which consisted of the thirteen alternate red and white stripes of the present flag of the United States, with the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew emblazoned on the blue canton or field in place of the stars.

In July, 1776, the colors worn by the U. S. S. *Reprisal*, which carried Dr. Franklin to France and was the first United States vessel of war that appeared in Europe after the Declaration of Independence, are described as thirteen stripes in a white and yellow field.

The present National colors (with the addition in later years of a star for each new State), were adopted by Congress on June 14, 1777.

The little fleet of Commodore Hopkins, flagship *Alfred*, sailed from Philadelphia early in February, 1776, on a cruise along the coast, but not finding any of the enemy's vessels it was decided to attack the town of New Providence, Bermuda, where the British were supposed to have a large amount of stores and ammunition.

About March 10, the Americans bombarded the town, and then landed a body of troops under the protection of the guns of the squadron and carried the port by storm. After remaining in possession of the town several days, they withdrew on March 17. They carried away a great quantity of supplies, including one hundred cannon, fifteen barrels of gunpowder and a large amount of general ammunition.

They also took as hostages Governor Brown and other prominent citizens, who were afterwards exchanged for American prisoners.

The first naval engagement occurred off the Bermudas April 6, 1776, between the *Alfred* and the *Cabot* on the American side and the British ship *Glasgow* of twenty guns. It was not a success, the enemy escaping.

In May, 1776, Jones was given command of the *Providence*, twelve guns. He made sixteen prizes in about six weeks. He was appointed to the *Ranger*, eighteen guns, June 14, 1777 (Flag Day), and hoisted with his own hands, as soon as one could be procured, the new and (destined to become) permanent flag of the Union. This was the first occasion on which "Old Glory" was spread to the breeze on an American naval ship. This flag was saluted by the French admiral at Quiberon Bay, which was the first salute that the Stars and Stripes received from a foreign power.

Jones made many prizes and broke up the fishery at Cape Breton. In November, 1777, he sailed to Europe, harassed the coasting trade of Scotland, and made a bold descent upon Whitehaven, taking two forts with thirty guns, which, of course, he could not retain, however, setting fire to the shipping in the

port. On April 24, 1778, he captured the *Drake*, a sloop of war, which, with two hundred prisoners, he took into Brest.

I will now, asking your indulgence for the time taken, and quoting freely from those most excellent works, Cooper's "Naval History" and Spear's "History of Our Navy," refer to the one sea fight of the American struggle for liberty that is of unfailing interest, namely, that in which John Paul Jones in the *Bonhomme Richard* whipped the British frigate *Serapis*. The reason for this interest is found in the fact that it was the man who won and not the ship or the crew. It was won in spite of obstacles such as no other man has ever been obliged to face at sea. It was a victory that was literally dragged out of the breakers of destruction. Jones, then unemployed, reached Brest, France, in May, 1778. In February, 1779, he was ordered in command of a ship. The delay was due, of course, to the lack of funds to the account of the American Commissioner in France.

France was at war with England, and Jones applied to the French Court, time and time again, but without success, until after he happened to examine one of Franklin's old "Almanacks," containing "Poor Richard's Maxims." He read therein this saying: "If you wish to have any business done faithfully and expeditiously, go and do it yourself." This is worth telling, first, because Jones acted on this advice, and on going to Paris was so well received that he got a ship, the *Duras*, and later a squadron under the terms of the celebrated concordat between France and the United States. It is also worth telling because the maxim made such a deep impression on him that, in honor of Dr. Franklin, he changed the name of his ship to *Bonhomme Richard*.

According to the concordat, an arrangement was finally made to give this celebrated officer employment that was as singular in its outlines, as it proved to be inconvenient in execution. The French Ministry supplied four vessels. Dr. Franklin, as Commissioner of the United States, who was supposed in a legal sense to direct the whole affair, added the U. S. S. *Alliance*, in virtue of the authority he held from Congress. All the ships but the *Alliance* were French built and were placed under the American flag by the following arrangement. The officers re-

ceived appointments, from Dr. Franklin, valid for a limited period only, while the vessels were to show the American ensign and no other. The laws and provisions of the American Navy were to govern. By a special provision, Captain Jones was to command. The joint right of the American Commissioner and the French Government to instruct the Commodore, and to direct the movements of the squadron was also recognized. From what source the money was actually obtained by which this squadron was fitted out is not exactly known, nor is it now probable that it will ever be ascertained. Dr. Franklin expressly states that he made no advances for any of the ships employed. Although the name of the king was used it is not improbable that private venture was at the bottom of the enterprise.

On reaching L'Orient where the ship was lying, Jones found her a large wall-sided merchantman that had ended her usefulness as a trader, and far behind in model and equipment the vessels of that day. Worst of all, she was so old that the life was out of all her timbers, and some of them were wholly rotten. Keeping heart, this energetic man set about fitting her for a warship, although most men would have hesitated about trusting themselves afloat off shore in her.

His next effort was to obtain a battery; finding that he could not get for his main deck eighteen-pounders he was forced to content himself with twelve-pounders; on the forecastle and the quarter-deck he mounted eight nine-pounders; for the lower deck he obtained six eighteen-pounders—three on each side; these, with three empty ports on each side served the purpose of making the enemy think the ship more powerful than she was.

Worst of all among the perils of this proposed cruise, was that found in the heterogeneous character of the crew, besides Americans it contained men from twelve other nationalities. With such a vessel and such a crew—short-handed at that—Captain Jones had to go to sea. Later he got some recruits of a better stamp.

Jones made a master's mate, named Richard Dale, his first lieutenant. He was a "hustler," and to him, next to Jones, the

credit of the great fight was due. Meanwhile, arrangements had been making to give Jones a fleet.

The vessels selected were the *Pallas* (a merchant ship), thirty-two guns; *Vengeance* (a brig), and the *Cerf* (a cutter), all Frenchmen. To these were added the U. S. frigate *Alliance*, thirty-two guns. She was so named on account of the recently formed alliance between France and the United States. As a further compliment to France, Lieutenant Landais, a French naval lieutenant, was placed in command of her. It will appear later that this was, to say the least, an unfortunate selection. The *Alliance*, under Landais, had carried Lafayette home to France after his service in America, and was narrowly saved from capture when a number of Englishmen in her crew mutinied.

It was not until June 19, 1779, that Captain Jones was able to sail with his little fleet. His troubles now began; Captain Landais was, from the start, mutinous. He claimed superiority of rank, and this not being allowed he was determined to thwart his chief in every way possible.

On the first night out he ran the *Alliance* foul of the *Bonhomme Richard*, doing so much injury that a return to port was necessary, and it was two months before the repairs were completed. This apparent unfortunate mishap proved, in the end, a blessing, for, while lying in port, more than one hundred Americans who came over from England through an exchange of prisoners, shipped with Captain Jones.

On August 14, 1779, the fleet sailed from L'Orient, augmented by the *Monsieur* and the *Granville*, two very good French privateers, which were soon a source of trouble.

Four days out, after an interference by Jones as to their unlawful doings, they left the fleet. Discontent then spread amongst the Frenchmen remaining. On August 24th, Captain Landais, in a most insolent manner, informed Captain Jones that he was determined to follow his own opinion in any matter that concerned the service. On September 2d Landais refused, even when a written order was sent him, to attend a council of the captains. On September 8th he disappeared with his vessel.

For several days the small squadron cruised; at one time Jones proposed to land at Leith for the purpose of levying tribute on it and on Edinburgh, but the argument with the captains lasted so long that by the time they agreed, it was too late.

On the morning of September 23, 1779, the day of all days in the career of John Paul Jones, the flagship and *Vengeance* fell in with the *Pallas* and *Alliance* (which had been missing). At noon a fleet that numbered forty-two ships was seen coming around Flamborough Head; if this was a war fleet the fate of the squadron was sealed. There was a light breeze at the time and the big fleet was well in-shore. Captain Jones, after a prolonged examination, concluded that he had merchantmen under convoy of two frigates, before him. Soon a signal was made from one of the frigates; immediately the merchantmen obeyed, scattering hither and yon, but the frigates, the *Serapis*, Captain Pearson, of fifty guns, and the *Countess of Scarborough*, Captain Piercy, twenty-two small guns, bravely bore down to meet the enemy, in spite of the fact that the Yankee fleet numbered four to their two. Captain Jones, now had, with good luck, an opportunity to do most effective service, but once more the insubordination of Landais on the *Alliance* became manifest, and well-nigh fatal, he not only refused to obey the signal of the flagship to fall in line, but he sailed near the *Pallas* and said to her captain: "If it is a ship of more than fifty guns we have nothing to do but to run away." Fortunately, Captain Catteneau did not agree with him, and he gallantly sailed to meet the smaller British frigate.

The *Alliance*, Captain Landais, was held aloof. The *Vengeance* was too far away to take part in the battle. The wind was very light and the ships merely drifted over the smooth water. Daylight faded into darkness; each side was waiting for the other. Eventually, in the profound silence of a night at sea, the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis* drew near each other; when separated by about ten yards a voice from the *Serapis* demanded: "What ship is that?" "I can't hear what you say," replied Jones. Then once more was heard: "What ship is that? Answer or I shall be of the necessity of firing into you."

Captain Jones, instead of answering the hail, gave the order to fire; the American guns were answered, as it were, in the same breath by those of the British, and the night battle was begun. It was then exactly seven o'clock. At the first fire two of the eighteen-pounders in the lower deck battery of the *Bonhomme Richard* burst. The ships drifted side by side and the men worked with desperate energy. The ten eighteen-pounders of the lower deck batteries of the *Serapis* soon had shot the six ports of the *Bonhomme Richard* into one huge chasm, and practically cleared the lower deck; she had also received several shots below the water line and was "leaking like a basket." The ships then fell foul of each other, and Captain Pearson was heard asking if the American ship had surrendered. Jones replied: "I have not yet begun to fight." This was at seven thirty; at ten minutes past eight the ships came together again and Jones with his own hands helped to pass the lashings; they drifted until nine o'clock when the *Serapis* anchored, the ships now lying with their star-board sides together. They were so close that the *Serapis* could not open the ports, so they fired through them, blowing the port lids off. On the *Bonhomme Richard* the men were no less determined; they fought their remaining guns with cheerful vigor.

Every twelve-pounder but one, and three little nine-pounders on the forecastle were silenced. Jones with his own hands worked with these guns. In this desperate strait the surgeon came from below and begged the captain to surrender, as the water was coming in so fast that the wounded were floating about, and he feared the ship would sink. He replied: "What, Doctor! would you have me strike to a drop of water? Here, help me get this gun over."

The enemy made an attempt to board. Jones, with a few men, pikes in hand, stopped them. Meantime matters had been going from bad to worse below decks on the *Bonhomme Richard*. Not only was she steadily filling with water, but the blazing wads from the enemy's guns had set her afire in several places. These fires spread rapidly in spite of the efforts of some men sent below.

Then came the *Alliance*, Captain Landais, previously referred to. He fired a broadside into the bow of the *Bonhomme Richard*

killing and wounding a dozen men. Private signals were set, and many voices called to him that he was firing into the wrong ship, but coming down on the broadside of the *Bonhomme Richard*, he fired again. Jones thought of yielding, but as the *Alliance* drew off, he continued to fight, not only against the enemy, but against the fire and water in his own ship. The fire was rapidly approaching the magazine, and the carpenter, finding the water five feet deep in the hold, said disconsolately that the ship would sink. At that the master-at-arms liberated the prisoners, over two hundred in number, and told them to save themselves. The struggle and confusion that followed was frightful; here were, indeed, many more English subjects running free than all the crew of the *Bonhomme Richard* who were below decks.

Then the gunner, in a panic of fear, strove to haul down the flag, shouting "Quarter! for God's sake, quarter! Our ship is sinking." Jones heard the words and hurling a pistol at the man, knocked him down the hatch. "Do you call for quarter?" shouted Captain Pearson. "Never!" replied Jones. "Then I'll give you none," said Pearson, and the fight went on.

Jones sent Dale below to look after the supply of powder, not knowing that the prisoners were free. Dale did not quail, but told them that their only hope of life was in keeping the ship afloat; they went to the pumps and to fighting the fire, working energetically.

A bright young fellow in the top, took a bucket of hand grenades and a candle, climbed out on the mainyard until over the hatch of the *Serapis,* and then began dropping the lighted grenades into the hold. The first one exploded a heap of cartridges which had accumulated on the lower deck; very many men were killed and wounded. This was the decisive moment of the battle. There were no men on the upper deck of the *Serapis,* and Captain Pearson, who had with undaunted courage directed the battle from the quarter deck, found himself practically alone, while Captain Jones was rallying his men successfully to increase the fire of his upper deck guns.

As the British commander saw the fight, he was without men, and the other Yankee frigate had but a short time before fired a broadside from which some balls had struck the *Serapis.* He

knew nothing of the treachery of the *Alliance*. Going to the flag that had been nailed to the mast, he tore it down with his own hands.

Lieutenant Dale, under orders from Jones, with a few men, jumped on board the *Serapis* to take charge. He saw a solitary person leaning on the tafrail in a melancholy posture; it was Captain Pearson. He said to Dale, "The ship has struck." While hurrying him on board the *Bonhomme Richard*, an officer came up from below and said to Captain Pearson that they had got three guns clear and could soon send the ship to the devil. He replied: "It is too late, sir; call the men off. The ship has struck." The officer replied, "I'll go below, sir, and call them off immediately." Dale, interfering, said, "No, sir; if you please, you'll come on board with me." Dale was of the opinion that if he got below he would disregard the surrender. It is not doubted that he might have done so.

After the surrender, about half-past ten, the *Bonhomme Richard* was found to be, in spite of all efforts, making much water; as well as being on fire in several places. The *Serapis* was also on fire. The fires were extinguished after much effort and great danger from the proximity of the magazines.

On September 25, the second day after the battle, the *Bonhomme Richard*, having been abandoned, sunk. She went down with her shot-torn battle flag hoisted at the peak.

On October 3, 1779, Jones arrived with his two prizes at the Texel, with a British squadron close behind him.

This description will give you some idea of the fighting in "wooden walls." How it will be in "steel walls" is a problem that may be solved in the near future.

The *Countess of Scarborough* was captured by the gallant Captain Catteneau, of the *Pallas*, after a two hours' fight.

Having given so much time to John Paul Jones, and I think rightly so, it may be of interest to know that he was born in Scotland on July 7, 1747; that his proper name was John Paul. In 1773 he went to Virginia, and for an unknown reason he added the surname Jones.

After the capture of the *Serapis* his career, although varied, was devoid of general interest. In 1781 he returned to the United States. Congress gave him a vote of thanks, a gold

medal, and by formal resolution, command of the *America*, 74 guns, then on the stocks. He superintended her construction until she was presented to Louis XVI in 1782, by whom he was made a Knight of the Order of Merit.

He went to Paris as agent for prize money claims; then went into the Russian service with the rank of Rear Admiral, receiving from the Empress Catherine the ribbon of St. Anne. He quarreled with the admiral (Prince of Nassau), and soon retired from the service. He also received a pension from Denmark.

He then settled in Paris, and died in 1792, in poverty and neglect, just before his appointment as Consular Agent to Algiers reached there.

Captain Landais, of the *Alliance*, should have been executed for his insubordination and treachery, but as a doubt existed as to his sanity, he was only dismissed.

In this famous fight each ship had forty-nine men killed; the *Serapis* sixty-eight and the *Bonhomme Richard* sixty-seven wounded, out of crews numbering respectively three hundred and twenty and three hundred and four men.

The last naval action of the War of the Revolution was fought by the *Alliance*, Captain Barry, on March 7, 1782. When not long out of Havana, three British frigates were encountered. Barry, having a large sum of money on board, made an effort to escape. However, a French ship of fifty guns hove in sight on the weather bow, and at that, Captain Barry waited for the leading English frigate, the *Sybille*, supposing, of course, that the Frenchman would join in. A severe fight followed, and at the end of fifty minutes the Englishman had out signals of distress. As the Frenchman held aloof, Captain Barry was compelled to let the enemy haul off under cover of his consorts.

Among the eight hundred vessels that were captured from the enemy during the war there was much of the material that succored the life of the Nation. Not one American cruiser was captured by English privateers, while sixteen English cruisers were taken by American privateers.

We must not be unmindful of the active and moral support received from La Belle France, not only in the shape of troops, but also from fleets. I have not time to recall the good services

of the troops, but all readers of history will remember the wonderful effect produced by the appearance off our coasts of the fleets commanded by the Admirals, Counts D'Estaing and De Ternay, with the culmination at Yorktown on October 19, 1781, in which the fleet of Count De Grasse took such a prominent part.

At present considerable interest is taken in submarine vessels for warlike purposes. Quite favorable reports have been made upon the *Holland* (an American type), and the indications are that for the purpose designed it will be a mechanical success. In this connection I will recall that the year 1777, among other things, was noted for the building of the first American submarine torpedo boat. David Bushnell, of Saybrook, Connecticut, an ingenious mechanical engineer, devised a turtle-shaped cask (which was propelled and steered by an oar cleverly fitted), large enough to hold a man and carry a torpedo containing one hundred and fifty pounds of powder and the apparatus used in firing. The torpedo was carried on the after part of the vessel; a rope extended from it to a wood-screw, which was so arranged in a tube in the forward part of the boat that it could be worked into the planks of a vessel, and when firmly fixed, it could be cast off by unscrewing the rod which fastened it upon the top of the tube.

When it was fixed and to be cast off from the tube, the magazine was to be cast off likewise, leaving it hanging to the screw. It was lighter than water, so that it might rise up against the object to which the screw and itself were attached. The magazine was provided with a clock, constructed to run any proposed time under twelve hours; when it had run out the time set it unpinioned a strong gun-lock which gave fire to the powder. The apparatus was so arranged that it could not possibly move, until, by casting off the magazine from the vessel, it was set in motion. Experiments of this device on a small scale were so successful that there was every reason to believe that it was practicable.

An attempt was made to use this weapon against a fifty-gun ship in New York harbor, but the operator in attempting to attach the screw struck what he supposed to be a bar of iron.

Not being very well skilled in the management of the vessel, in attempting to move to another place he lost the ship, and as daylight was approaching he dared not renew the attempt. Mr. Bushnell, unable to get pecuniary assistance, was obliged to give up this undertaking for awhile.

In conclusion, I will say that I am a firm believer in the successful future of the submarine torpedo boat. It is comparatively inexpensive, can be transported and handled on shipboard, ready for an emergency, and as an adjunct of harbor defense will be invaluable.

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